

HUMILITY -- THE TRAIT THAT SET LEE APART

12. "So after he had washed their feet, and had taken his garments, and was set down again, he said unto them, 'Know ye what I have done to you?

13. Ye call me Master and Lord: and ye say well; for so I am.

14. If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet.

15. For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you.'"

ST. JOHN, Chapter 13:12-15

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Christ taught his disciples many lessons. Humility was one of them. Humility! The state or quality of being humble in spirit, freedom from pride and arrogance, humble courtesy. Today I would like to talk to you about General Robert E. Lee, an American so clothed with humility in his time that he is set apart from mankind in death, as he was in life. The more one studies the character of Robert Edward Lee, seeking to probe its depths, discover its ultimate touchstone and secret, the more one is convinced that the foundation of the man's whole nature was a deep religious humility.

Lee's was not a religion which depended upon the outward observance, -- he did not, in fact, formally unite with his church until he was a grown man. Although eventually confirmed in the faith of his fathers, as represented by the Protestant Episcopal Church, Lee had no narrow belief in the power of rituals and formulas. "Assuredly," writes Gamaliel Bradford in his noble tribute, Lee the American, "It was not a religion of sect. It was broad enough to go even beyond the bounds of Christianity and recognize earnestness of intention in those of a different creed altogether."

Lee's friend, the Reverend Doctor John William Jones, himself a Baptist clergyman, who had served as a chaplain during the War and in Lee's last years as one of the chaplains at Washington College where he was thrown into intimate contact with the General, is authority for the following anecdote:

"An application of a Jewish soldier for permission to attend certain ceremonies of his synagogue in Richmond was endorsed by his captain: 'Disapproved. If such applications were granted, the whole army would turn Jews or shaking Quakers.' When the paper came to General Lee, he endorsed on it, 'Approved, and respectfully returned to Captain Blank, with the advice that he should always respect the religious views and feelings of others.'"

From the same source we learn that Lee was once asked for his



views on the apostolic succession. He replied that he had never thought of it, and on another, similar occasion, he remarked, "I never trouble myself about such questions; my chief concern is to try to be a humble, sincere Christian myself." One is reminded of the Master's reply to Martha of old in Lee's comment to a lady who complained to him that little Lenten food -- fish, oysters, etc. -- was obtainable in Lexington:

"Mrs. Blank, I would not trouble myself about special dishes; I suppose if we try to abstain from special sins, that is all that will be expected of us."

In view of this childlike simplicity, this true, unaffected humility, unfettered by ritual or dogma, it may seem paradoxical that when evaluating his life and character, one is at once struck by the enormous importance of Lee's ancestry and immediate background.

Lee was not humble through necessity. His story does not fit the joke credited to Groucho Marx on the subject of humbleness of a rival comedian. "He has a lot to be humble about"! said Groucho.

Quite to the contrary, Robert E. Lee had much to be proud of. While not endowed with great wealth, he was a member of the Virginia aristocracy -- two of his uncles had signed the Declaration of Independence; his father, "Light Horse Harry" Lee, had been one of George Washington's right hand men in the Revolution and was a former governor of Virginia, two other uncles had distinguished themselves in the field of diplomacy; and in appearance and manner he was gifted as few men before or after him.

At West Point, he was the top military man in his class and runner-up for academic honors; upon graduation, he married Mary Ann Randolph Custis, granddaughter through adoption of George Washington and a member of one of Virginia's wealthiest families -- their home became handsome Arlington. In the regular Army, Lee distinguished himself in the war with Mexico and in carrying out various engineering assignments in peacetime; and, at the outbreak of the War Between the States, he was offered the command of the Union Army -- indicative of having reached the pinnacle of his profession.

Here then was a man's man, a genuinely successful man, a man who had much of which to be proud. General Joseph Johnston, a classmate of Lee's at West Point, and one of the Confederacy's most able military men, made the following observation about his friend at West Point:



"We had the same intimate associates who thought as I did that no other youth or man so united the qualities that win warm friendship and command high respect. For he was full of sympathy and kindness, genial and fond of gay conversation, and even fun, while his correctness of demeanor and attention to all his duties, personal and official, and a dignity as much a part of himself as the elegance of his person, gave him a superiority that every one acknowledged in his heart."

This dignity which so impressed Johnston and others was his humility -- his humble courtesies. In youth, this trait within the nature of one so commanding and elegant in appearance, set him apart from all others.

A more ambitious soldier might have accepted command of the Union's troops, knowing the inferiority of the Confederacy's forces and supplies. Lee's code of ethics left him no choice but to resign his commission. He would not build a reputation by sacrificing honor and neglecting his first duty after God -- to Virginia and his people. He accepted the appointment of commander of the military and naval forces of Virginia. In accepting this position, he said:

"I would have much preferred had your choice fallen on an abler man. Trusting in Almighty God, an approving conscience, and the aid of my fellow-citizens, I devote myself to the service of my native State ... ."

His record in the War Between the States is oft-written and oft-read history. He was a great soldier and a great strategist. Even more important, he was humble. Humility enabled him to get the maximum effort from his men, and this humbleness made him a saint in the eyes of his men.

One story of his soldiers' regard for him came out of the war and featured the men around a campfire as Lee rode by. A Confederate private remarked: "Well, boys, the rest of us may have developed from monkeys, but I tell you only God Almighty could make a man like Marse Robert!"

One of the most touching scenes in history took place at Appomattox Courthouse, Virginia, the day Lee surrendered his Army of Northern Virginia. Shortly thereafter he told his troops goodbye. In concluding his brief message, he said:

"You will take with you the satisfaction that proceeds from the consciousness of duty faithfully performed; and I earnestly pray that a merciful God will extend to you his blessing and protection. With an unceasing admiration of your constancy and devotion to your country, and a grateful remembrance of your kind and generous consideration of myself, I bid you an affectionate farewell."

This should have been the end of the Lee story -- a sad chapter,



true, but one not unusual for defeated generals. As General Douglas MacArthur said at a later date: "Old soldiers never die, they just fade away."

General Lee, unsuccessful in his big adventure with the Confederacy, and without opportunity in the Union army, should have "faded". His home at Arlington had been confiscated by the United States government. He had never been employed outside the Army. It appeared that a great soldier's career had come to an end, that the Lee myth created during the war years could now be written for posterity.

What a lesser man would have done is difficult to surmise. Lee had his name and reputation, and might have traded them for positions of grandeur abroad or for positions of wealth in the business world. His niche had been carved in the hall of greatness during four years, as leader of the Confederate Army in one of the most tragic chapters of history. One human quality prevented him from capitalizing on his fame -- humility.

Lee had carved a reputation for genius and leadership in a war which resulted in the greatest part of the South's young manhood being killed or maimed. His men had trusted and adored him, and, even in defeat, they looked to him for leadership.

The defeated Confederate general turned to God for his help. In a letter to a friend who had presented him with a Bible shortly after the War, Lee expressed his thanks, referring to the Bible as "A book in comparison with which all others in my eyes are of minor importance, and which in all my perplexities has never failed to give me light and strength."

As the worshiped leader of a defeated people, Lee held his head high and set out to give an example to his people.

"Human virtue should be equal to human calamity," he told them.

On another occasion, he said of defeat:

"We cannot help it, and we must endure it. We must exert all our patience, and in His own good time God will relieve us, and make all things work together for good, if we give him our love and place in him our trust."

The presidency of a small college in the Shenandoah Valley, Washington College, was offered Lee. The salary was to be \$1500 annually -- if funds were available. He accepted this position only after explaining to the trustees his serious doubts as to whether



he could do full justice to the job.

In asking the Board to reconsider their offer he explained one of these doubts:

"Being excluded from the terms of amnesty in the Proclamation of the President of the United States of the 29th of May (1865), I am an object of censure to a portion of the country. I have thought it probable that my occupation of the position of President might draw upon the College a feeling of hostility."

In taking over the administration of war-torn Washington College, Lee first built a chapel -- a nucleus for the college. He confided to Dr. White, Stonewall Jackson's old Lexington, Virginia, pastor:

"I shall be disappointed, sir; I shall fail in the leading object that brought me here unless these young men all become real Christians, and I wish you and all the others in your sacred profession to do all you can to accomplish this result."

Lee lived but five years after taking the oath of presidency of little Washington College; yet, his vigor, clarity of vision and wisdom of policy in these few years earned for him, and his college, a position in the history of American education. To quote from Dr. Francis Pendleton Gaines, president of Washington and Lee University since 1930:

"The central objective of his administration was to create and fortify an institution that would minister to the greatly changed civilization of his people ...

"Here was a New South that would need legislation, legal adjustment, legal interpretation, and Lee added a division of law. Here was a New South that must see broad utilization of natural resources and emphasis upon transportation, and Lee added a school of engineering. Here was a New South that would pass at least in part from the agrarian mode of the plantation to the order of business, and Lee projected a school of commerce, probably the first ever planned upon collegiate levels, though the project waited many years for its fulfillment. Here was a New South that required intelligent guidance in the formulation of public opinion, and Lee organized a course for journalism, with certain practical experience provided."

As president of Washington College, he commanded the same respect from students and the nation's citizens as he had while leading the South's armies in wartime. It may be recalled that Stonewall Jackson made the statement in midst of war: "Lee is a phenomenon. He is the only man I would follow blindfolded."

Lee could not have been blind to the high regard with which his friends and much of the nation's population held him. He saw in this regard a duty to set an example for his followers. As Lincoln in the North would likely have done had he lived, Lee tried



his best to heal the wounds of war. On many occasions, unhappy, disillusioned Southerners attempted to get fuel for bitterness from him.

"But, General Lee, did you never feel any bitterness toward the North," one such Southerner asked him.

His answer came in quiet tones: "I believe I may say, looking into my own heart, and speaking as in the presence of God, that I have never known one moment of bitterness or resentment."

Jefferson Davis, the President of the Confederacy and Lee's commander-in-chief, summed up in one sentence his friend's life, a life which even today is used as a model by every true Southern father:

"This good citizen, this gallant soldier, this great general, this true patriot, had yet a higher praise than this, or these, -- he was a true Christian."

In closing, I would like to refer to the book of MICAH, Chapter 6, eighth verse:

8. "He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?"

Robert E. Lee obviously followed this simple code. It was his simple humility and humbleness of character which set him apart, ahead, and above, his fellowmen.

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